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On the early morning hours of July 23rd 1952, a small cadre of junior Egyptian military officers, tipped by a Palace insider that their secret organization has been discovered, fanned out in Cairo and Alexandria in a bold and desperate attempt to take over the government and forestall their own arrest. The charisma and popularity of the leader of the “Free Officers Movement” in Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser, should not obscure the fact that similarly inspired military movements struggled for power in Iraq and Syria during this period. Set in the context of the global cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, these movements and their confrontation with the monarchies of the region set the stage for what has been called an Arab cold war.

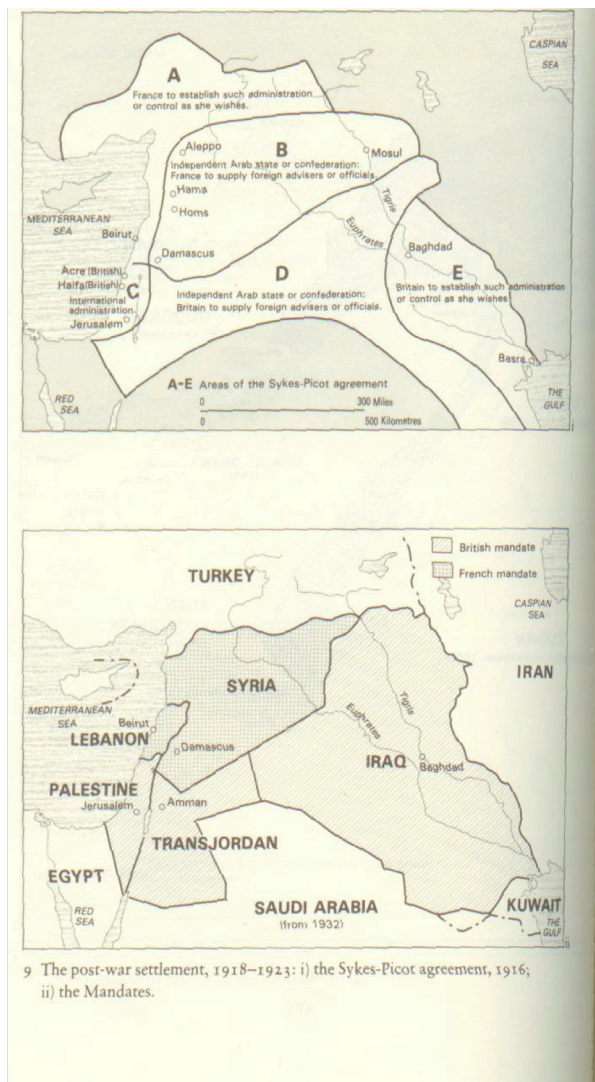
The confrontation between these two rival camps, framed by the military officers as one between “revolutionary” republics and “conservative” monarchies, was not simply a regional example of the global confrontation between the USA and the USSR. Going beyond the division of the world into East and West, these movements saw the world in terms of North and South, and sought to redefine the balance of power in this relationship. These movements sought to alter the path of history, the role and definition of the people, as well as the status and nature of their leaders. For a moment in time, they enthusiastically declared an independent will to fundamentally change the political, economic, social and cultural fabric of their societies.

These movements did not burst onto the historical stage out of thin air. They were both the product of and a response to a longer history of colonialism, dependent economic

development, and political structures increasingly perceived as unrepresentative and socially unresponsive. In what follows, the historical background to these movements is presented, followed by the context of the global cold war in which these movements had to operate, and finally an overview of Third-Worldism as a social and cultural movement.

WWI and Mandates

The countries of the Arab Middle East as they are recognizable today were the outcome of WWI and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. World War One in the Middle East was experienced far from the frontlines in the form of food shortages, famines, disease, forced migration, and genocide. While Turkey emerged as an independent state with Ataturk at its helm after waging a successful war of “national liberation”, the Ottoman Empire's Arab territories were entrusted by the newly created League of Nations, contrary to popular and



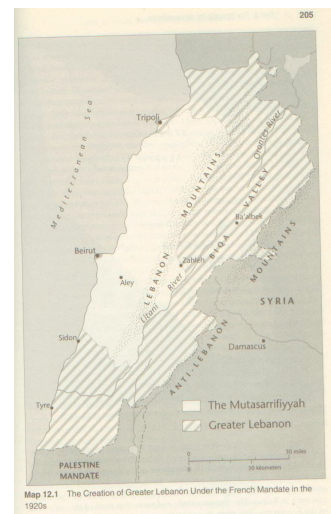
sometimes violent opposition by the local populations, to the British and French who were “mandated” to prepare these provinces for eventual independence.



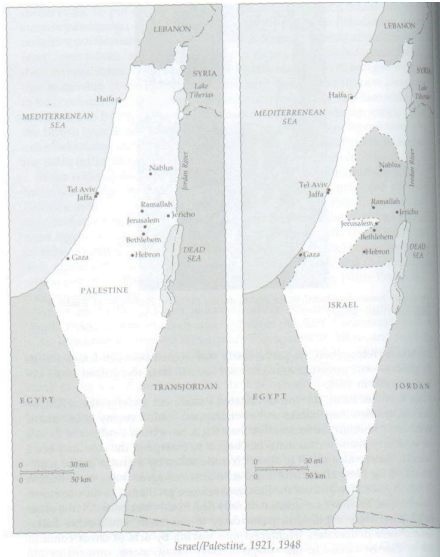
Emir Faisal

Thus, the current states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq were eventually created to accommodate colonial interest, conflicting wartime promises, and shifting political alliances. This process proved to be vexing, most so in the case of the mandate for the newly created Palestine, and the British government’s public endorsement for a Jewish homeland there. The Sherif of Mecca, who had raised the banner of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans during the war, made famous by T.E. Lawrence, had assurances from the British that the entirety of the fertile crescent: historic Syria (encompassing present day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine) and the future Iraq, would be one Arab state, a Hashemite kingdom ruled by him and his descendants. His son, Faisal, was the field commander for the revolt, leading the celebrated raid on ‘Aqaba and the ‘liberation’ of Damascus.

The French, who were assured by the British that historic Syria was theirs as post war spoils, were also disappointed. With their own designs for their truncated Syria, which included the expansion of the Maronite mount of Lebanon region into present day Lebanon, the French were not willing to keep the British backed King Faisal, on



the throne in Damascus. Forced from Syria, Faisal was installed as the King of Hashemite Iraq,



James Gelvin - The Modern Middle East, A History
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by the British, who grouped the newly minted country from three disparate Ottoman provinces. Abdullah, his older brother, who had been promised the throne of Iraq, was instead installed in Amman and the eventual Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a forbidding desert slice carved out of the mandate of Palestine, where Jewish migrants and native residents contested what remained of the land.

The Arab Middle East between 1919 and 1945

Alongside the new states, new broad publics and mass constituencies also came into being. Mass political parties were formed, and parliamentary life was institutionalized. States thus sought to create the nations and the national publics they ostensibly represented, and these newly created citizenries put forward their own demands. During the interwar period, the Middle East experienced the world wide inflation during the 1920s and depression during the 1930s. In the 1930s, infrastructure improvements, opportunities and social benefits attracted immigration of greater numbers of the still largely peasant populations away from the bleak realities of the countryside towards the cities. It is these newly formed constituencies that politicians sought to, either, organize and mobilize, or, to control and suppress.

In Egypt, in 1919, a sustained mass program of urban unrest and rural violence proclaimed a collective demand for national independence. Denied recognition as Egypt's delegation (*wafd*) at the post WWI peace conference at Versailles, and worse, sent into exile, immediately transformed this delegation into a mass political party, and ignited what has since become known as the 1919



Sa'd Zaghlul (leader of the Wafd)

Revolution. In response to the unrest, the British granted unilateral independence in 1922. This came with six stipulations, or exemptions that were meant to maintain indirect rule by the British, including control over Egypt's foreign policy, reoccupation with declarations of war, and protection of foreign and religious minorities. A constitution drafted on a Belgian example was promulgated in 1923 and parliamentary life dominated by the Wafd followed a year later. By the 1930s domestic politics were often at a deadlock as the British, the Crown, and Parliament vied for their own agendas. Disenchantment with political life was paired during the 1930s with social and economic hardship. With the cities swelling, and the countryside suffering, economic and class interests were intimately tied to political demands and often trumped national independence as the immediate issue.

During the period leading up to WWII, the fissure between political party leaders, often the social elite, and their base of working and peasant masses, grew. By the time the Free Officers took power in 1952 the once popular king and even the Wafd had become sullied. The political order, and the generation that had participated in it were at the nadir of their public

support. They were challenged by newer organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Young Egypt, and the Wafd Vanguard, who celebrated youth and action, complete with fascist-styled shirt colors and martial training. Domestic politics, thus, took on a decisively more militant tinge, especially after a renegotiated Anglo-Egyptian agreement in 1936 produced little more than a twenty year sunset clause for foreign capitulations to finally come to an end.

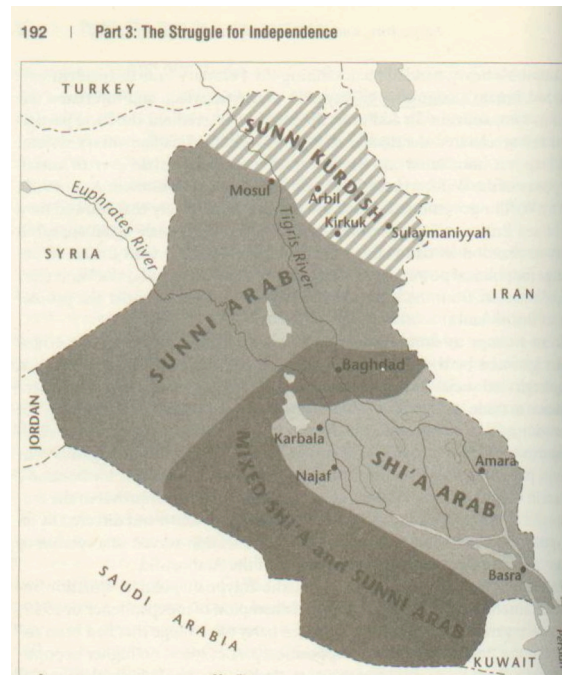
In Iraq, like Egypt, large land holdings elites dominated political life. In Iraq most of these holdings came into being in the 1920s as the sheikhs of large tribes were registered as the private owners of communal pastoral lands. Thus in both countries, the vast majority of cultivable lands were held in the hands of a tiny minority who owned vast tracks of villages and in many ways, even those who lived in them. In Egypt for example, one half of one percent of landowners owned 35 percent of the land, the next slice of landowners, five and one half percent owned 30 percent of the land, and the remaining 94 percent of landowners owned the last 35 percent of land. The situation in Iraq was even worse for peasants. Eighty percent of the population was rural and an estimated 90 percent of these were sharecropping tenants who lived in a feudal relationship with their landlord. All in all, less than one percent of landowners controlled over 55 percent of all privately owned land by the time of the 1958 revolution.¹

¹ William Cleveland, A History of the Modern Middle East (1994) 285, 308

In Iraq the situation was even more complicated by the fact that multiple ethnic and religious groups were lumped together somewhat haphazardly into the newly created state. These groups had coexisted in the Ottoman Empire, but their continued coexistence in the age of nation-states with organizing principles based on common linguistic and/or religious affiliation, proved to be problematic. From the earliest days of Iraq's inception it was members of the

minority Sunni Arab population that dominated political life. While this was to have a long-term effect on the country's social fabric, it was junior military officers that played the most immediate role in destabilizing political life in Iraq. Beginning in 1936, frequent military coups d'états (six through 1941) in collusion with politicians reduced the functioning of the legislature into a game of political intrigue.

During WWII, the British took action in both Iraq and Egypt that further weakened the internal legitimacy of dominant political actors. Reeling from the Nazi onslaught and serious battlefield losses in Europe, Britain did not brook any thing less than the full support of the Iraqi and Egyptian governments. When it looked that parliamentary majorities in both countries were leaning towards the Axis, the British moved militarily in both cases, as it also did in the



William Cleveland A History of the Modern Middle East (1994)
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case of Iran, to ensure its control of vital wartime support and supply networks. In Iraq this resulted in the 1941 Rashid Ali revolt, or the Anglo-Iraqi war, which resulted in the formal reoccupation of Iraq by the British.

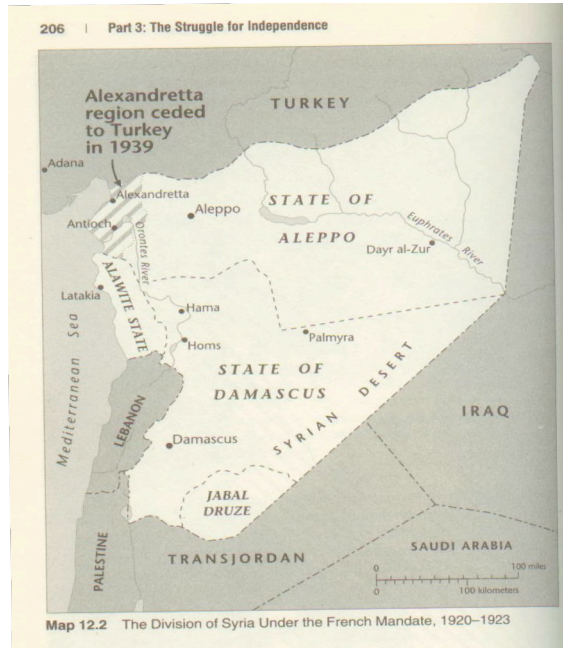
The reappointment of Nuri al-Sa'id in this manner tarnished him in the eyes of nationalists. Likewise in Egypt, in 1942, British tanks encircled the royal palace and delivered an ultimatum to the King, either to dismiss the Axis-sympathetic prime



British ultimatum

minister and appoint an Ally-friendly Wafd cabinet, or to abdicate. The acceptance of the Wafd to accede to power in this way permanently tarnished its nationalist credentials in the eyes of many.

In Syria, the situation differed than Iraq and Egypt given that, unlike British methods of ruling indirectly through local intermediaries, the French preferred direct control and governance, ultimately backed up by a standing garrison. Hindering the development of a Syrian national identity was the policy by the French to carve out smaller territories based on ethnic and religious differences. Thus a small compact state of Alawis alongside one for the Druze were created. Amongst Sunnis, a separate state was created around Aleppo, and another in the southern territory dominated by Damascus. Both areas were politically dominated by the rich merchant urban class.



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Despite these attempts at divide and rule, for two years: 1925-1927, Syria was in revolt against French rule. It was brought to an end only after massive French military reinforcement and devastating shelling of most urban centers. After this revolt, prominent Syrian leaders came together in founding the National Bloc. Many of these leaders were prominent since the Ottoman

period, which is to say, they were representative of the landowning urban notables and local government officials. They presented themselves to the French as indispensable local intermediaries. While they presented themselves as nationalists committed to national independence and territorial integrity of Syria, they often compromised on these questions, and above all represented the preservation of the existing patterns of social, economic, and political relationships that formed the basis for their elite status and power. In this way the National Bloc in Syria was similar in makeup and outlook as the Wafd in Egypt, and the Nuri al-Sa'îd faction of the Iraqi elite. Even more than these latter two, the National Bloc in Syria was ever more hampered by the continued direct intervention of French officials and failed to sink

deep roots in the new Syrian polity, much less ensure its lasting popularity or legitimacy where social issues were concerned.

Throughout this period in all three countries, inflation then agricultural depression had led to rural flight and increasing political radicalism. The political legitimacy of the old elites was under greater strain, as a result of their past collaboration with the Mandatory powers, and as a result of greater inequality. The dismal showing in the 1948 war against Israel alienated many, most importantly, those in the army, many of whom were recruited from non-elites strata. Following the war, there was a rash of military revolutions, revolts, coups, at the mid-century mark. The political developments in the region were magnified given the context of the global cold war tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Revolutions at mid-Century

The division of the Arab Middle East into pro-West and pro-Soviet camps was not a foregone conclusion at the onset of these revolutions. The Free Officers of Egypt for example were initially viewed favourably in Washington. This was due to no small part because of an overlapping set of assumptions shared between these young revolutionaries and those who advocated what was known as “modernization theories” in the academies and halls of power in the West. Both viewed the nation-state as the fundamental unit leading towards development and modernity. The officers viewed themselves, and were perceived by modernization theorists, as the vanguard of a new middle class with a historic role in guiding the modernization of their societies. This path towards ‘modernity’ was also viewed as fraught with

social and political pitfalls, thus the officers and the theorists in the West had an equivocal attitude towards political democracy. Both believed that carefully planned, even centralized state planning, economic development was necessary to eradicate potentially destabilizing social inequities and engender the political stability necessary for the eventual establishment of a healthy democracy. In the atmosphere of the heightened cold war during the 1960s, the independence streak exhibited by such movements was less tolerated.

By 1956, the much-disdained foreign capitulations regime in Egypt had come to an end. Much more had in fact happened, and much of it to the surprise of the three main players in national politics since nominal independence: the British, the Crown, and Parliament. By the time the deadline for British evacuation rolled around, two mainstays of Egyptian political order had already been tossed aside. The monarchy was abolished, Egypt was declared a republic, and previous political party leaders were put on corruption trials. A year after the initial takeover, land reform, long promised to the suffering Egyptian peasant, was also underway. Egypt's last and largest pre-revolutionary organization, the Muslim Brotherhood also lost its struggle for power, and was outlawed in 1954.

By 1956 this “popular will” was widely perceived to have become personified with the charismatic young leader who led the movement that by now was being proclaimed a



Nasser

revolution, Gamal Abdul Nasser. That January he was acclaimed by popular referendum as President of Egypt, and that July he nationalized the Suez Canal, to wild applause domestically and regionally. By the end of the fall Nasser would reach the zenith of his popularity as he survives the triple invasion of Israel, France, and Britain to wrestle away the Canal Zone.

Nasser’s popularity at this point transcended Egypt and thoroughly engrossed Arabs across the Middle East. His popularity however with the region’s leaders was more problematic. In the Middle East, he was always more popular with the masses than he was with other leaders.

In 1958 the latest in a series of government shakeups and military coups brought the Ba‘ath party to power in Syria. In a bid to stabilize and shore up their hold on power, a hastily arranged union between Syria and Egypt was declared. Similarly, in Lebanon, a Nasserite inspired anti-regime revolt broke out. Fearing that these developments would spread to Jordan, King Hussein called for support from his fellow Hashemite King of Iraq. Instead of providing such support however, the Iraqi detachment turned towards Baghdad and overthrew the



King Hussein

monarchy there. With this execution of their closest client in the region, coming just two years after their loss of Suez, the British dropped in enough paratroopers to ensure the well being of their last best regional ally, the young King Hussein of Jordan. This was overshadowed by the fact that at the same time, United States Marines were swarming onto the shores of Beirut to for-stall any possible Nasserite inspired coup in Lebanon.

The overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq met no opposition for a variety of reasons, not least being its continued reliance on the British. This nationalist legitimacy deficit was highlighted with the 1955 creation of the Baghdad Pact, which included Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, the United States and Great Britain in an alliance meant to contain the Soviet Union.

Nasser in Egypt railed against any such proposed security arrangements that were meant to enlist countries in the region to take sides in the cold war. Meeting in Bandung with other like-minded leaders, they called instead for neutrality, giving birth to the Non-Aligned Movement. With the overthrow of the Hashemite Monarchy in 1958, Iraq withdrew from the Baghdad Pact.



Bandung Conference 1955

Conclusion

In important ways, the military officers who took power after WWII did not represent a total break from the past. The more successful politicians and activists of the preceding era had increasingly adopted a more populist rhetoric and radical agendas for social transformation.

Populist movements employ a dichotomous rhetoric, by which they claim to represent the

majority of the people versus elites depicted as depriving these masses of their political rights and fair livelihood.



Free Officers (Egypt) 1952

These movements were in part a reaction to the legacy of imperialism, peripheral development, and what was perceived as this collaborationist elite. Festering throughout the interwar period this was part of a broader critique by a younger generation against the politically and economically entrenched old guard who were characterized as morally and nationally corrupt. This old guard's political system of liberal democracy (whether fully functional or not) was criticized as morally (a tool of self interest) and nationally (a colonial imposition) corrupt. Their economic system of private capitalism was likewise attacked as being morally (private gain being elevated above national development) and nationally (used to keep collaborationist elite in power and the nation in a dependent position) corrupt.

Thus, the initial programs proposed by the officers were very similar to those that had been circulating among the politically-mobilized urban middle and lower strata from whom they sprang and to who they now looked for support. Instead of elections contested by political parties however, the officers chose an ever-strengthened executive and relied on referendums acclaiming the popular will, backed up by a single party, and corporate syndicates. What differentiates corporatism from pluralism on a functional level is that while the latter is made up of multiple, voluntary, competitive, non-hierarchically ordered and self-determined units; corporatism is the antithesis of all of these, that is: a single party, and compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchical, state organized units. What differentiates them on an ideological level is that pluralism trusts in the shifting balance of mechanically intersecting forces while corporatism believes in the functional adjustment of an organically interdependent whole.² The populist phase of these revolutions was characterized by the state's promotion of industrial development oriented towards consumer goods (Import Substitution and Industrialization).³

Like the military movements in Syria and Iraq, the Free Officers in Egypt had no programmatic deliberation and took an early decision to avoid divisive ideological debates within their ranks. Yet their similar social background, as urban dwellers, graduates of military academies, and the products of lower middle or middle class upbringing, determined a shared

² Schmitter, P. C. (1974). "Still the Century of Corporatism?" Review of Politics **36** 85-131.

³ Collier, D. (1979). Overview of the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian Model. The New Authoritarianism in Latin America. D. Collier. Princeton, Princeton University Press: 19-32.

outlook and set of unarticulated assumptions about national independence and social justice as well as acceptance of universal conceptions about modernity and progress. Thus, these coups were not radical revolutions to begin with. They projected a populist orientation but did so while accommodating the needs and concerns of the private sector. They purged leftists from their inner circle, enacted policies long advocated by industrialists, boosted the holdings of national banks, and eased restrictions on foreign investment.

Accommodation gave way to domination and revolts became revolutions by the 1960s. Precipitated by the Suez War (1956), Nasser in Egypt pushed for state domination of both the economic and political spheres; by expanding wartime sequestration of alien resident and foreign owned assets into a full-scale program of nationalization and centralized planning. This was accompanied by a corresponding shift in the official political discourse away from democracy and liberal political freedoms. This resonated with the population not as a result of coercion and fear, but because the ultimately declared goals of the movement- national independence and social justice- articulated the concerns of a large portion of the population. This was not the case of empty rhetoric; it was matched with a host of programs: rural electrification, food subsidies, rent control, free educational opportunities, and guaranteed civil service appointments. All of this created coalitions with a vested interest in maintaining this new order.⁴

⁴ Gelvin, J. (2002). Developmentalism, Revolution, and Freedom in the Arab Middle East: The Cases of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The Idea of Freedom in Asia and Africa. R. H. Taylor. Stanford, Stanford University Press.

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